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ABSTRACT

This unit provides a bibliography and lesson ideas on Indian culture for integration into the literature curriculum. The bibliography includes essays, novels, short stories, poetry, and videos, many by Indian authors. The unit is designed for high school students but could be adapted to other levels. This unit could be incorporated with a study of India's land, history, and geography, or used with cultural comparisons. (EH)

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CURRICULUM PROJECTS DEVELOPED
by
1995 SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS

Jennifer Abrams
Independent Curriculum Project
Fulbright-Hays India Seminar, Summer 1995

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United States Educational Foundation in India

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Introduction -

When students enter my classroom this year they are greeted by my new Indian "friends." Indian music tapes sing to them as they write creatively, Gandhi makes his presence felt as he quietly meditates at the back of the room, handmade cards done by Indian women wave to them from the bulletin boards and on the file cabinet Ganesh smiles and bids them welcome. I myself may greet the class wearing an brightly dyed Indian skirt, tiger's eye beads purchased in Calcutta or a salwar kameez from Delhi and my ever-present Bombay sandals. But the guidelines for this project do not mention making reference to how I "imbue" my classes with my newly awakened love for India. It subtly states that the project cannot be about the India photograph sessions with a school board member or the superintendent or how I have come to feeling very comfortable acknowledging people with hands in a prayer position and a "Namaste" or even how I simply now see outside the box of American culture with a much clearer focus. But if one of the goals of doing projects is to "expand the impact of the seminar" then I am compelled to tell you details like those above. For in the end it is the feeling that one gives off when describing an experience that will make the lasting impact.

Background Notes-

I teach literature, writing and speech to 135 students grades nine through twelve in a suburban school in Palo Alto, California. I teach in a department of thirteen teachers. We have had a core curriculum in place for longer than I can remember and my one summer in India can realistically only make a small dent in how the classes function. I am a rational but ever hopeful educator. Tiny steps add up. Drops of water after a long period of time will create a mark on the soil. (I am running out of metaphors.) The point is I have put together a bibliography and lessons that one can use <u>realistically</u> with curriculum already in place and yet actively bring Indian culture a bit more into focus. With fifteen percent of world's population living in India it seems a crime that our high school's literature curriculum doesn't make mention of one Indian author. With my plan I believe it is feasible to academically enhance the curriculum with work from the sub-continent.

Curriculum Ideas -

Travelers' Tales India edited by James O'Reilly and Larry Habegger, Travelers Tales, Inc. 1995 (Toll-free number in the USA1-800-889-8969) is a wonderful set of travel essays that will work in a variety of places in the classroom. A few highlights:

"India: An Introduction" - It is a beautifully written introduction and evenhanded in its description of India. I am toying with using it as a sample if I ever finish teaching an American literature course and want students to write an original introductory essay to a travel guide using what they now know about American culture and history and values.

"Caretakers of the Dead" - Jonah Blank writes an incredible essay about the "Harijans" (men whose job it is to cremate bodies) in Varanasi. I think rituals surrounding death are a great starting point to talk about cultural differences. I will incorporate this discussion at the end of Brave New World as John mourns the death of his mother and the methods used to keep her drugged during her demise. How do societies greet death? This essay, some talk of ancient Egyptian rites and other assorted tidbits, (maybe some "literature" from a funeral home) and one could have a good discussion.

"Love Has Teeth" - A cute essay about food and romance that could easily enhance a study of Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel.

"The Suffering of Eve" - Discussion of the laws that do not effectively protect women in India. I will be teaching a Women Writers course in the spring and plan on discussing women's rights around the world. It will open some very young eyes to the differences in status of women in different countries.

"A Wedding in Mahabaleshwar" - Jan Haag's account of her last minute "invitation" to a wedding could help students see difference in wedding rituals. Add this to a chapter from India File as well as a few short pieces by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni from Arranged Marriage, my personal pictures of a bride and wedding in Delhi and it could be an educational short unit.

Travelers' Tales India - It is a wonderful resource with an outstanding recommended book list in the back and a great bibliography. It also has short snippets from a variety of books interspersed the text. Excellent quoting opportunities abound. The Travelers' Tales Thailand is also wonderful.

India File by Trevor Fishlock, Rupa & Co, 1983 (only available in India- any good hotel bookstore carries it. I bought mine in Jaipur.) A few lesson plan ideas:

Chapter eight: "A tale of three cities" - For teaching "showing" writing Fishlock is a great model. I have my students do a "Place Paper." They go to a place, immerse themselves in all the detail, get a dominant impression of the locale and set out to write a piece that will evoke the mood of the place; a video in words. In this chapter Fishlock brings Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta to life. All the senses are used. The students could either here it read aloud and write down each really clear description or get a few photocopied pages and at the end of each typed line draw an eye, ear, mouth, hand or nose to keep track which senses Fishlock used. By the end of a page it would be clear to all that this author really "shows" us these Indian cities.

Chapter two: "Girl for ardent boy" - Portions of this chapter could be included in a discussion of marriage practices in different cultures along with Jan Haag's essay from Travelers' Tales India.

Chapter eleven: "Pudding" - The subtitle is "British Footprints in Indian Sand." I am doing a unit involving racial issues that includes a South African play, "Master Harold"...and the boys, and "A Small Place" by Jamaica Kincaid and "Shooting an Elephant" by George Orwell. This Fishlock chapter would be perfect addition to this unit by setting the mood. What were these clubs and hill stations really like when Britain ruled. Add pictures from an American edition of Plain Tales From the Raj by Charles Allen and a few lines from The East and the West by Swami Vivekananda (Advaita Ashrama Publications, Calcutta, 1994) about how we must learn how to look at things from two sides and one has a good week of meaningful discourse.

The Inscrutable Americans by Anurag Mathur, Rupa & Co., 1991 is not a book I would use in full in the classroom. I think the notion that all American men think about is sex is incorrect and overdone and would not contribute to the students' education but there are a few scenes that might fit in nicely to either an American literature class or a speech class.

p. 59-63, Football from a non-American perspective - A great description of one of our "sacred rites." I think this might effectively jar the students and get them thinking about how ethnocentric we as people can become.

p. 124-125, Cultures Compared - A short but sweet compare-contrast segment showing us the pluses and minuses of both cultures. Could be used in a variety of classroom situations.

p. 138-139, Gum Chewing Research - A wonderful paragraph about how one chews gum and what it says about the person. In a speech/drama class doing a lesson on non-verbal communication this little reading could be great. Hand out everyone a piece of bubble gum and read this portion. Get people to act out moods and how one might chew gum a particular way to show the mood. Good acting work and facial expression exercise!

p. 189 - American Idioms - In my speech and communication class we talk quite a bit about slang and what it says about a person when he or she uses it. This segment talks about the person in the room that may or may not understand you because of the idioms you use. Combine with an American idiom book and you have an effective lesson to teach about language and the vernacular.

The Boss Came To Dinner by Bisham Sahni, Writers Workshop Limited Edition (Given to us by P. Lal in Calcutta. Perhaps if you went through USEF/I they could obtain a copy for you.) This short story in and of itself wasn't as powerful as the way it was read. This presentation type was very effective in getting us to dig into the cultural problems in the story that are imbedded in the text. Everytime Mr. Lal felt an "outsider" was missing something in the piece he would stop reading, step to the right and assume the role of the cultural navigator, explain the subtext and then jump one step to the left and resume reading. This could only be done with a short piece as with something longer the explanations might become very tedious but it left me wondering if that model could be used effectively in early readings of British literature. My students feel very cut off from the British culture. It may as well be Mars to them. Alien. Find a short story that incorporates quite a few mores of the British that the students might not understand. Jump in and out of the role of cultural navigator. It would be an effective way to decipher some of the unspoken "rules" of a culture.

The Slate of Life: An anthology of stories by Indian women published by Kali for Women in New Delhi has some powerful pieces in it. Two are going straight into my curriculum:

"Hand-me-downs" - Wajida Tabassum is a happy author because her story is soon to be the basis of a major motion picture. This story shocks. It is real. Rivalry and friendship. Jealousy and betrayal. This will start the ball rolling during talks about women and competition in my Women Writers course next term.

"Dead-end" - Ajeet Cour writes a poignant story about encountering enemies and what happens when you get to know them a little. I think I will incorporate it in with All Quiet on the Western Front as the protagonist confronts an enemy face to face and must "face up" to killing another human being.

Lessons by P. Lal. (Writers Workshop Publications, Calcutta, 1991) Lal read to us one portion of this "autobiography" of his time spent in intensive care in the United States. The portion on compassion across country lines and simply loving another human being is powerful. I am not sure when I may need a touching paragraph or two on love and the human spirit but I know where to look.

The Ramayana (Check through the versions to see what works best for your grade level. I will be using the one put out by Lustre Press Pvt. Ltd. in New Delhi. Text by Anupa Lal. Illustrations by Pulak Biswas.) A perfect complement to the stories of King Arthur or a reading of The Sword in the Stone by T.H. White as well as an introduction to Eastern heroes. It might be a great compare-contrast unit or one could just read through the journeys and pick out key moments that match well and read aloud from The Ramayana at that time.

A Passage to India by E.M. Forster is a good honors read for a course. I initially set out to teach the text in my honors British literature course but after I returned from India I could not teach it. I found it too difficult to get across to students who could not reach an understanding of the British culture. The whole book would feel far too foreign to most.

Books to Research for my Women Writers Course:

I purchased many books I have yet to read but will try to incorporate into my Women Writers Course in the spring. I am guessing I will have my students read some of the works for independent reading projects or I will skim through and incorporate sections of texts within discussions on certain themes.

Bumiller, Elisabeth. May You Be The Mother Of A Hundred Sons: A Journey Among the Women of India. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990.

Deshpande, Shashi. The Intrusion and Other Stories. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. Arranged Marriage. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.

Holmstrom, Lakshmi, ed. The Inner Courtyard: Stories by Indian Women. Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1990.

Jung, Anees. Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1987.

Mara, Rachna. Of Customs and Excise. Second Story Press, 1991.

Zide, Arlene R.K., ed. In Their Own Voice: The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women Poets. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1993.

An aside: I will be able to teach Divakaruni's Arranged Marriage and Bharati Mukherjee's The Middleman and other stories and Jasmine in my American literature classes in an immigrant literature section.

And Even More Ideas:

Other short story collections I need to peruse more closely include:

Ezekiel, Nissim and Mukherjee, Meenakshi, ed. Another India: An Anthology of Contemporary Indian Fiction and Poetry. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990.

Narayan, R.K.. Malgudi Days. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1982.

A Little American-Indian Exchange:

After expressing my interest in what a high school student was reading in an English medium class in India I was sent a series of stories. They are used in English medium literature classes at the St. James School in Calcutta. The pieces were photocopied for me and appear to have come from a book titled Twelve Contemporary Short Stories. Pieces chosen included:

"A Devoted Son" - Anita Desai
"The Eyes Have It" - Ruskin Bond
"How Raj Kapoor Saved My Life" - Allan Sealy
"Badger" - Jug Suraiya

Books, Poems and Videos Still To Read or View:

As I am just seven weeks into this exploration of Indian literature I still have far to go. Here are a few more texts and videos I will be perusing.

Gandhi's Autobiography
Kim by Rudyard Kipling
"Ajanta" by Muriel Rukeyser
Heat and Dust by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala
The Householder by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala
the PBS series of The Jewel in the Crown
Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie
Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God by Jonah Blank

Reference Books On Hand in my Classroom:

The City of Joy by Dominique Lapierre
Freedom at Midnight by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre
Indian Mythology by Veronica Ions
Hinduism: An Introduction by Shakunthala Jagannathan
Discover Sublime India by Sunithi L. Narayan and Revathi Nagaswami

Conclusion -

During a lecture at the Fulbright House in Delhi an editor of the Times in Delhi told us that he hoped we Fulbrighters would not go home thinking that six weeks in Delhi was a sufficient amount of time to gather information to go home and write a coffee table book about his country. Six weeks wasn't enough time for me to do anything but watch and absorb. Eve Merriam said in her poem, "A Lazy Thought," "It takes a lot of slow to grow." Seven weeks later I find myself slowly processing intellectually or emotionally. I am hardly able to write a coffee table book on India or even a short article for my university paper or an essay for my national journal. I expect it will take some time. What I can provide to USEF/I at this stage are these few pages, some curriculum concepts and a clear interest in uncovering texts that could open up my world and those of my students.

But I can assure USEF/I that our seminar had an impact. At the surface it expresses itself in many ways. Now when I see a video on India I pick it up, when I see a book review on an Indian author I read it, when I go to Tower records I browse through the international section; I am hooked. In my heart, the changes are immense. As sentimental as it sounds, I fell in love with a country half way around the world and I will never be the same. While I understand that curriculum ideas are what is most crucial in this document I cannot help smiling as I think of what was most crucial to me, the experience itself. And students will see that smile on my face and know that too.